

**L. E. Chittenden, "An Historical Letter," July 1898**

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### **An Historical Letter.**

It is not often that historical fact and humor are so happily combined as in the following interesting letter from our valued friend, the Hon. L. E. Chittenden, who vividly narrates his early experiences as a photographic sitter:

MY DEAR MURPHY:

You ask for a confession of my first experience in the art of Daguerre, and since confession is good for the soul, you shall have it.

In September, 1842, when I was eighteen years old, I had read Blackstone, and thought myself a greater lawyer than I have since supposed or claimed myself to be. I was at the Court of Franklin County in St. Albans, Vt. There I met two peripatetic artists from the great City of Boston, who were offering to make portraits of such accuracy that they were more like than the sitter, for five dollars each. They called them Daguerreotypes. They had not been able to secure a victim, for the mechanism was fearfully made and its operation awful to behold!

They offered to give me my portrait if I would endure the trial. I was ambitious and did not wish to deprive the bar of the opportunity of securing my portrait so cheaply, and in a moment of weakness I consented. The operators rolled out what looked like an overgrown barber's chair with a ballot box attachment on a staff in front of it. I was seated in the chair and its Briarean arms seized me by the wrists, ankles, waist and shoulders. There was an iron bar which served as an elongation of the spine, with a cross bar in which the head rested, which held my head and neck as in a vice. Then, when I felt like a martyr in the embrace of the Nuremburg "Maiden," I was told to assume my best Sunday expression, to fix my eyes on the first letter of the sign of a beer saloon opposite, and not to move or wink on pain of "spoiling the exposure." One of the executioners then said I must not close my eyes or move for ten minutes, at the end of which he would signal by a tap on the ballot box. The length of that cycle was too awful for description. There was not such another in the "time, times and half," of the Prophet Daniel, or in the whole of "Pollock's Course of Time." It was a time of agony, and I supposed at first that it would come to an end, but I had to abandon that hope. I began to recall and review the tortures of which I had read, "Fox's Book of Martyrs," "The History of the Inquisition," and had nearly finished "Las Cases," "Tyrannies and Cruelties of the Spaniards" when the tap came and the anguish ended.

Some days afterward the portrait was produced. It was a portrait with a tremolo attachment of wavy lines, the eyes leaden, the nose too large, the expression dull and

heavy. And yet it was regarded as a triumph of art. The printing of anything directly from the object was in itself so extraordinary that one scarcely thought of criticising the print. I myself thought it was the most wonderful advance in art that had ever occurred. Now when I recall the pitiful results of this experiment and mentally compare them with the exquisitely beautiful illustrations in the number of CAMERA NOTES you have sent me, I cannot but feel that the world owes a larger debt to photography than to wood and line engraving and etching combined. I think I have never seen an etching which surpasses the "Lombardy Pastoral" in all the qualities that makes an etching attractive.

Cordially yours,

(Signed), L. E. CHITTENDEN.

March 14, 1898.

[End of text.]

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

The University of Vermont Library / Special Collections holds a collection of papers of Lucius Eugene Chittenden.

See also the sale catalogue, *The Library of Hon. L. E. Chittenden: January 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th 1894* (New York: Bangs & Co., 1894).

1. <http://cdi.uvm.edu/findingaids/collection/chittendenle.ead.xml>
2. <http://books.google.com/books?id=xd6vjf30vYQC>

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